



Software Diversification for WebAssembly

JAVIER CABRERA-ARTEAGA

Doctoral Thesis in Computer Science
Supervised by
Benoit Baudry and Martin Monperrus

Stockholm, Sweden, March 2024

TRITA-EECS-AVL-2024:10
ISBN 100-

KTH Royal Institute of Technology
School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science
Division of Software and Computer Systems
SE-10044 Stockholm
Sweden

Akademisk avhandling som med tillstånd av Kungl Tekniska högskolan framlägges
till offentlig granskning för avläggande av Teknologie doktorexamen i elektroteknik
i .

© Javier Cabrera-Arteaga , March 7th 2024

Tryck: Universitetsservice US AB

Abstract

WebAssembly, now the fourth officially recognized web language, enables web browsers to port native applications for the Web. Furthermore, WebAssembly has evolved into an essential element for backend scenarios such as cloud computing and edge computing. Therefore, WebAssembly finds use in a plethora of applications, including but not limited to, web browsers, blockchain, and cloud computing. Despite the emphasis on security since its design and specification, WebAssembly remains susceptible to various forms of attacks, including memory corruption and side-channels. Furthermore, WebAssembly has been manipulated to disseminate malware, particularly in cases of browser cryptojacking.

Web page resources, including those containing WebAssembly binaries, are predominantly served from centralized data centers in the modern digital landscape. In conjunction with browser clients, thousands of edge devices operate millions of identical WebAssembly instantiations every second. This phenomenon creates a highly predictable ecosystem, wherein potential attackers can anticipate behavior either in browsers or backend nodes. Such predictability escalates the potential impact of vulnerabilities within these ecosystems, paving the way for high-impact side-channel and memory attacks. For instance, a flaw in a web browser, triggered by a defective WebAssembly program, holds the potential to affect millions of users.

This work aims to harden the security within the WebAssembly ecosystem through the introduction of Software Diversification methods and tools. Software Diversification is a strategy designed to augment the costs of exploiting vulnerabilities by making software less predictable. The unpredictability within ecosystems can be diminished by automatically generating different, yet functionally equivalent, program variants. These variants strengthen observable properties that are typically used to launch attacks, and in many instances, can completely eliminate such vulnerabilities.

This work introduces three tools: CROW, MEWE, and WASM-MUTATE. Each tool has been specifically designed to tackle a unique facet of Software Diversification. We present empirical evidence demonstrating the potential application of our Software Diversification methods to WebAssembly programs in two distinct ways: Offensive and Defensive Software Diversification. Our research into Offensive Software Diversification in WebAssembly unveils potential paths for enhancing the detection of WebAssembly malware. On the other hand, our experiments in Defensive Software Diversification show that WebAssembly programs can be hardened against side-channel attacks, specifically the Spectre attack.

Keywords: WebAssembly, Software Diversification, Side-Channels

Sammanfattning

WebAssembly, nu det fjärde officiellt erkända webspråket, gör det möjligt för webbläsare att portera nativa applikationer till webben. Dessutom har WebAssembly utvecklats till en väsentlig komponent för backend-scenarier såsom molnberäkning och kantberäkning. Därmed används WebAssembly i en mängd olika applikationer, inklusive men inte begränsat till webbläsare, blockchain och molnberäkning. Trots betoningen på säkerhet sedan dess design och specifikation är WebAssembly fortfarande mottagligt för olika former av attacker, inklusive minneskorruption och sidkanaler. Dessutom har WebAssembly manipulerats för att sprida skadlig programvara, särskilt vid fall av browser cryptojacking.

Webbsidresurser, inklusive de som innehåller WebAssembly-binärer, serveras huvudsakligen från centraliserade datacenter i den moderna digitala miljön. Tusentals kantenheter, i samarbete med webbläsarklienter, kör miljontals identiska WebAssembly-instantieringar varje sekund. Denna fenomen skapar ett högt förutsägbart ekosystem, där potentiella angripare kan förutse beteendet antingen i webbläsare eller backend-noder. En sådan förutsägbarhet ökar potentialen för sårbarheter inom dessa ekosystem och öppnar dörren för högpåverkande sidkanal- och minnesattacker. Till exempel kan en brist i en webbläsare, framkallad av ett defekt WebAssembly-program, ha potential att påverka miljontals användare.

Denna avhandling syftar till att stärka säkerheten inom WebAssembly-ekosystemet genom införandet av metoder och verktyg för mjukvarudiversifiering. Mjukvarudiversifiering är en strategi som är utformad för att öka kostnaderna för att exploatera sårbarheter genom att göra programvaran oförutsägbar. Oförutsägbarheten inom ekosystem kan minskas genom att automatiskt generera olika programvaruvarianter. Dessa varianter förstärker observerbara egenskaper som vanligtvis används för att starta attacker och kan i många fall helt eliminera sådana sårbarheter.

Detta arbete introducerar tre verktyg: CROW, MEWE och WASM-MUTATE. Varje verktyg har utformats specifikt för att hantera en unik aspekt av mjukvarudiversifiering. Vi presenterar empiriska bevis som visar på potentialen för tillämpning av våra metoder för mjukvarudiversifiering på WebAssembly-program på två distinkta sätt: Offensiv och Defensiv mjukvarudiversifiering. Vår forskning om Offensiv mjukvarudiversifiering i WebAssembly avslöjar potentiella vägar för att förbättra upptäckten av WebAssembly-malware. Å andra sidan visar våra experiment inom Defensiv mjukvarudiversifiering att WebAssembly-program kan härdat mot sidkanalattacker, särskilt Spectre-attacken.

LIST OF PAPERS

1. ***WebAssembly Diversification for Malware Evasion***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Tim Toady, Martin Monperrus, Benoit Baudry
Computers & Security, Volume 131, 2023, 17 pages
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167404823002067>
2. ***WASM-MUTATE: Fast and Effective Binary Diversification for WebAssembly***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Nicholas Fitzgerald, Martin Monperrus, Benoit Baudry
Submitted to Computers & Security, under revision, 20 pages
<https://arxiv.org/pdf/2309.07638.pdf>
3. ***Multi-Variant Execution at the Edge***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Pierre Laperdrix, Martin Monperrus, Benoit Baudry
Workshop on Moving Target Defense (MTD 2022), 12 pages
<https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3560828.3564007>
4. ***CROW: Code Diversification for WebAssembly***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Orestis Floros, Oscar Vera-Pérez, Benoit Baudry, Martin Monperrus
Workshop on Measurements, Attacks, and Defenses for the Web (MADWeb 2021), 12 pages
<https://doi.org/10.14722/madweb.2021.23004>
5. ***Superoptimization of WebAssembly Bytecode***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Shrinish Donde, Jian Gu, Orestis Floros, Lucas Satabin, Benoit Baudry, Martin Monperrus
Conference Companion of the 4th International Conference on Art, Science, and Engineering of Programming (Programming 2021), MoreVMs, 4 pages
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3397537.3397567>
6. ***Scalable Comparison of JavaScript V8 Bytecode Traces***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Martin Monperrus, Benoit Baudry
11th ACM SIGPLAN International Workshop on Virtual Machines and Intermediate Languages (SPLASH 2019), 10 pages
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3358504.3361228>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Contents

List of Papers	iii
Acknowledgement	iv
Contents	1
 I Thesis	 4
1 Introduction	5
1.1 WebAssembly	6
1.2 Predictability in WebAssembly ecosystems	8
1.3 Problem statements	9
1.4 Approach: Software Diversification	9
1.5 Summary of research papers	10
1.6 Thesis outline	12
 2 Background and state of the art	 13
2.1 WebAssembly	13
2.1.1 From source code to WebAssembly	14
2.1.2 WebAssembly’s binary format	17
2.1.3 WebAssembly’s runtime	18
2.1.4 WebAssembly’s control-flow	20
2.1.5 Security and reliability for WebAssembly	21
2.1.6 Open challenges	22
2.2 Software diversification	23
2.2.1 Automatic generation of software variants	23
2.2.2 Equivalence Checking	26
2.2.3 Variants deployment	27

2.2.4	Measuring Software Diversification	28
2.2.5	Offensive or Defensive assessment of diversification	29
2.3	Open challenges for Software Diversification	30
3	Automatic Software Diversification for WebAssembly	32
3.1	CROW: Code Randomization of WebAssembly	33
3.1.1	Enumerative synthesis	33
3.1.2	Constant inferring	35
3.1.3	Exemplifying CROW	36
3.2	MEWE: Multi-variant Execution for WebAssembly	38
3.2.1	Multivariant call graph.	39
3.2.2	Exemplifying a Multivariant binary	40
3.3	WASM-MUTATE: Fast and Effective Binary Diversification for WebAssembly	41
3.3.1	WebAssembly Rewriting Rules	42
3.3.2	E-Graphs traversals	44
3.3.3	Exemplifying WASM-MUTATE	44
3.4	Comparing CROW, MEWE, and WASM-MUTATE	47
3.4.1	Security applications	50
3.5	Conclusions.	51
4	Assessing Software Diversification for WebAssembly	52
4.1	Offensive Diversification: Malware evasion.	52
4.1.1	Cryptojacking defense evasion	53
4.1.2	Methodology	54
4.1.3	Results	56
4.2	Defensive Diversification: Speculative Side-channel protection . .	59
4.2.1	Threat model: speculative side-channel attacks	60
4.2.2	Methodology	61
4.2.3	Results	63
4.3	Conclusions.	67
5	Conclusions and Future Work	68
5.1	Summary of technical contributions	68
5.2	Key results of the thesis	69

<i>CONTENTS</i>	3
-----------------	---

5.3 Future Work	70
5.3.1 Data augmentation for Machine Learning on WebAssembly programs.	70
5.3.2 Improving WebAssembly malware detection via canonicalization	71
5.3.3 Oneshot Diversification	72

References	73
-------------------	-----------

II Included papers	89
---------------------------	-----------

WebAssembly Diversification for Malware Evasion	91
---	-----------

WASM-MUTATE: Fast and Effective Binary Diversification for WebAssembly	92
--	-----------

CROW: Code Diversification for WebAssembly	93
--	-----------

Multi-Variant Execution at the Edge	94
-------------------------------------	-----------

Superoptimization of WebAssembly Bytecode	95
---	-----------

Scalable Comparison of JavaScript V8 Bytecode Traces	96
--	-----------

Part I

Thesis